

World

## Generation Jihad

Rootless and restive, young Muslims in Europe are increasingly turning to religious extremism. An inside look at the threat of homegrown militants  
By BILL POWELL

Oct. 3, 2000

The last time Myriam Cherif saw her son Peter, 23, was in May 2003, when the two of them stood at the elevator on the fifth floor of the gritty public-housing project where they lived, just north of Paris. Myriam, 48, was born in Tunisia, moved to France when she was 16 and became a French citizen. Peter's father, who died when the boy was 14, was a Catholic from the French Antilles in the Caribbean. But Peter took a different path. In 2002 he converted to Islam and became a devout Muslim. He took to wearing loose trousers and a long tunic instead of blue jeans and repeatedly told Myriam that she should wear the traditional Muslim head scarf. And then one day last spring, Peter told his mother he was heading off to Syria to study Arabic and the Koran.

At first, Peter e-mailed his mother every couple of days, sending her snapshots and news of his studies in Damascus. Last July he told her he was headed for a "spiritual retreat" and would be out of touch for a while. She heard nothing until December, when she received a brief phone call from a French government official who told her that Peter had been captured by U.S. soldiers in the Iraqi city of Fallujah.

Today Peter, one of five French citizens captured by U.S. forces in Iraq, is being held at Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad, family members say. More than a year since she last heard from her son, Myriam Cherif is still trying to understand how, in the streets and cafés of Paris, Peter and other young Muslims like him were lured into giving up their lives in the West and pursuing jihad. "They saw aggressive, violent images on the Internet and asked questions about why Muslims were suffering abroad while European countries were doing nothing," she says. "It's like they set off a bomb in their heads."

Since 9/11, the Bush Administration has argued that the best way to prevent further attacks by al-Qaeda and its sympathizers is to fight Islamic extremists on their turf, in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, before they make it to the West. But among Europeans, the suicide bombings in London on July 7 of this year, which were carried out by four British citizens, shattered any lingering illusions that the threat can be kept from their shores. In a videotaped message released last week on al-Jazeera, Osama bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, claimed responsibility for the London attacks—the first public acknowledgment that the bombers may have received support and assistance from al-Qaeda operatives. In Europe the message was a chilling reminder that the enemy is within. Jihadist networks are increasingly drawing on a pool of young Muslims living in cities all over Europe—including many who were born and raised in the affluence and openness of the West, products of the very democracies they are determined to attack.

Call it Generation Jihad—restive, rootless young Muslims who have spent their lives in Europe but now find themselves alienated from their societies and the policies of their governments. While the precise number of European jihadists is impossible to pinpoint, counterterrorism officials believe the pool of radicals is growing. Since 1990, the Muslim population in Europe has expanded from an estimated 10 million to 14 million. (Estimates of the number of Muslims in the U.S. range from 2 million to 5 million.) A 2003 estimate by the intelligence unit of French police found that about 15% of the country's indexed 1,600 mosques and prayer halls were under the control of extremist elements. A study of 1,160 recent French converts to Islam found that 23% identified themselves as Salafists, members of a sect sometimes associated with violent extremism. In the Netherlands, home to 1 million Muslims, a spokesman for the Dutch intelligence service says it believes as many as 20 different hard-line Islamic groups may be operating in the country—some simply prayer groups adhering to radical interpretations of the Koran, others perhaps organizing and recruiting for violence. In London, authorities say, as many as 3,000 veterans of al-Qaeda training camps over the years were born or based in Britain.

What explains the proliferation of Europe's homegrown radicals? And what dangers do they pose? Interviews with dozens of Muslims across Western Europe reveal a wide range of explanations for why so many are responding to the call of radical Islam. A common sentiment among members of Generation Jihad is frustration with a perceived scarcity of opportunity and disappointment at public policies that they believe target Muslims unfairly. Some lack a sense of belonging in European societies, which have long struggled to assimilate immigrants from the Islamic world. Many, in particular younger Muslims, suffer disproportionately from Europe's high-unemployment, slow-growth economies. Some are outraged over the bloodshed in Iraq and the persistent notion—stoked by Osama bin Laden but increasingly accepted among moderates—that the West is waging an assault on Islam.

The rage expressed by members of Generation Jihad has raised concerns among European counterterrorism officials that policies pursued by the U.S. and its allies in response to the Islamic terrorist threat may be further galvanizing radicals. Says a French investigator with a decade of antiterrorism experience: "There's a spreading atmosphere of indignation among normal Muslims that's echoing among the younger generation."

The echoes can be heard in many neighborhoods of north and east London, where Sajid Sharif, 29, a trained civil engineer who goes by the name Abu Uzair, once handed out incendiary leaflets preaching his brand of extreme Islam. From the comfort of his home, he leads the Savior Sect, a group that claims several hundred supporters and seeks to unite all Muslims worldwide under a strict conception of Islamic law. That might seem fanciful—except that Uzair's mentor, Omar Bakri Muhammad, was one of the first clerics to lose his right to live in Britain under the new antiterrorism laws. He was barred from returning after a holiday abroad. Uzair says he isn't concerned about the threat of eviction because he is British born, and his lawyer has reportedly told him he has little to worry about. "Anyway," says Uzair, "it is all in the hands of Allah."

Uzair is bearded, wears a long white gown and quotes nonstop from the Koran and Hadith (a collection of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad). His Pakistani parents are secular Muslims, he says, and speak very little English. In his youth he smoked and went to night clubs. It was not until he was a university student in Britain that he embraced Islam. "I wanted some inner discipline," he says. "Since I have come to Islam, I have a lot of tranquillity." Now he tries to steer people away from drugs, drink, crime and smoking. Uzair's supporters refuse to vote in elections because his sect recognizes only Shari'a, Islamic law. While he does not openly support terrorism, he declares that the July 7 attacks were retaliation for Britain's support of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. "The majority of Muslims in the U.K. are frustrated, but they cannot speak," he says. "They will not condone the London bombings, but inside they believe that Britain had it coming."

The hostility Uzair feels toward the country of his birth is not atypical. Many second-generation Muslims in Europe say they feel a part of neither their native countries nor their parents' heritage. Riad, 22, a French citizen who has been unemployed since 2002 and who asked to be identified by his first name, embodies the sense of estrangement. "They say we are French, and we would like to believe that as well," he says, sitting in a café in the Vénissieux suburb of Lyons. "But do we look like normal French people to you?" His friend Karim, 24, says they are discriminated against because of their long beards. "Who will give us a job when we look like this? We have to fend for ourselves and find a way out."

That lack of connection to their native societies can often lead Muslims in Europe to seek order in religion. Zaheer Khan, 30, who grew up in the county of Kent in southeast England, was drawn to radical Islam as a college student in the mid-1990s. The Wahhabi and Salafist recruiters, he says, "would tell you that things like taking out car insurance are against Islamic principles, or voting—this is haram, forbidden. Slowly the disengagement was there. You didn't say, 'Let's explore what it means to be living in Britain.' This didn't come up." The radical feelings that Khan had back then—although he is still devout, he has since moved away from radical Islam—are apparently widespread among second-generation Muslims. "The problem is that they have no real roots," says Dominique Many, a lawyer for one of the Muslim Frenchmen taken into custody by French officials on suspicion of volunteering to fight against U.S. forces in Iraq. "In Tunisia they are considered foreigners. In France they are considered foreigners. This is the new generation of Muslims."

Rootlessness is compounded by economic struggle. On the whole, Muslims in Europe are far more likely to be unemployed than non-Muslims are. In Britain, almost two-thirds of children of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin—ethnic groups that together account for three-fifths of Britain's Muslims—are categorized as poor; the national average is 28%. A French law-enforcement source says jobless Muslims are "the easy marks, the fodder of jihadist networks." Yassin el-Abdi, 24, a trained accountant in Mechelen, Belgium, who has been unemployed for three years, says extremists in Europe are making a bad situation for Muslims even worse. "These people who are planting the bombs are wrecking things for us," says el-Abdi. And the depressing reality, says his friend Said Bouazza, who runs a job-training center in Mechelen, is that unemployment is only adding to the jihadists' ranks. "It's like a ticking time bomb. There are people who fight back by opening their own store. Or they plant bombs."

The kinds of young people taking up the jihadist cause in Europe might have been more inclined in the past to drift into a life of crime or drug use. The more committed would have had to journey to religious seminaries and training camps in places like Pakistan and Afghanistan to receive indoctrination in jihad. But now they don't need to leave home. The Internet has played a huge role in fostering a sense of community among both the fanatics and those who would join them. "They're becoming dedicated Islamists without ever leaving their home nations," a French counterterrorism official says.

What's more, TIME's reporting across Europe shows, the war in Iraq has further radicalized some Muslims, convincing them that the U.S. and Britain are bent on war with Islam and that the only proper response is to fight back. Listen to Uzair, the Savior Sect leader in London: "Muslims are being killed all over the world through the foreign policy of the U.K. and U.S. Many feel they cannot sit around and do nothing about it. What is the difference between a suicide bomber and a B-27? I really feel that war has been declared on Islam." Iraq, says a senior French security official, "has acted as a formidable booster" for extremist groups.

In Belgium, a radical Muslim named Karim Hassoun who is head of the Arab-European League, says flatly, "The more body bags of Americans we see coming back from Iraq, the happier we are." What's worrisome is how openly such rhetoric is received among ordinary Muslims, many of whom consider themselves moderates. In the Netherlands, where 1 of every 11 Dutch citizens is a Muslim, it's trendy for kids to hang on their bedroom walls half-burned American flags with Stars of David placed on them, says Mohammed Ridouan Jabri, founder of the eight-month-old Muslim Democratic Party.

What can be done to defuse the anger? European governments have tried a range of approaches to contain radical Islam. In the wake of the July 7 bombings, British Prime Minister Tony Blair introduced a zero-tolerance policy toward hateful rhetoric, pledging, among other things, to deport clerics seen to be inciting violence. The crackdown represented a shift from Britain's tradition of tolerating militant speech. But some moderate Muslims fear that in his rush to get tough, Blair risks further estranging young European Muslims by heightening their sense that they are outsiders. "It reinforces bin Laden's arguments that citizenship is nothing, that nationality is a mirage blinding Muslims to their only real allegiance—to God, as jihadists define it," says Dounia Bouzar, a scholar and commentator on the lives of French-born Muslims like herself. Bouzar also laments France's 2004 law banning "conspicuous" religious symbols from public schools because its foremost target is the head scarves worn by certain devout Muslim females. Although enforcement of the law has not sparked the mass expulsion of hijab-wearing students that many feared, Bouzar says it has caused splits within the Muslim community.

The dilemma for Muslims across Europe is that in the wake of July 7, public demand for tougher measures against terrorism is stifling open discussion of the grievances that are fueling extremism—which allows hard-liners to crowd out moderate voices. "There is no middle ground now," says Naima Azough, 22, a Dutch parliamentarian from Morocco. "It's as if in the U.S. you heard only Noam Chomsky and Pat Buchanan."

Bolstering moderates will require change within Europe's Muslim communities but also greater political sensitivity outside them—a willingness to acknowledge, for instance, the emotional impact that some policies enacted in the war on terrorism have had on Muslims. At a meeting of the radical Muslim group Hizb ut-Tahrir in Birmingham, England, the group's spokesman, Imran Waheed, ٢٨, launched into a ٤٠-minute lecture in front of about ٨٠ people, insisting there's no need for the Muslim community to apologize for July ٧. Many in the audience nodded in agreement. But some seemed ambivalent, caught between abhorrence for terrorism and a belief that their grievances are not taken seriously.

After praying with the other men in an adjacent room, a smiling twentysomething, sporting pressed trousers and shirt and wearing neat, round glasses, began by pointing out that Islam forbids violence and the bombing of innocent people. "Our hearts are bleeding for the [July ٧ victims]," he said, and in the next breath criticized the U.S. and Britain for ignoring the ways in which their policies may be adding to young Muslims' feelings of alienation. As a result, he says, the members of his generation "are frustrated. Their voices are not being heard." If the world hopes to understand—let alone overcome—the anger that roils Europe's young Muslims, it had better start to listen. --Reported by Jessica Carsen/ Leeds, Bruce Crumley and Vivienne Walt/Paris, Helen Gibson and Andrea Gerlin/London, James Graff and Jane Walker/Madrid, Sayem Mehmood/ Lyons and Adam Smith/Birmingham